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INDONESIAN INDEPENDENCE DAY: TIMORESE HAVE NOTHING TO CELEBRATE

By Anne Treseder

Sixteen advocates for East Timor braved verbal and physical abuse at Indonesian Independence Day festivities on August 19-20 in San Francisco's Union Square in order to remind celebrants of the ongoing Indonesian genocide in the former Portuguese colony.

Clergy and lay representatives of East Timor Religious Outreach, as well as East Timor Action Network members, attended the gala 50th anniversary celebration and cultural exhibit. They distributed leaflets congratulating the Indonesians on their independence, but reminding them that their own government is presently denying independence to tiny, neighboring East Timor.

The leaflets contained statements by Indonesians active in the effort to free Timor, who expressed the hope that Indonesians themselves would insist that their government withdraw from East Timor once they learned the truth about what is happening there.

"The Timorese have said that their fight is not against the Indonesian people, but the Indonesian government," said Rev. John Chamberlin, who helped organize the protest. "Many Indonesians attending this celebration are undoubtedly good-hearted people who are unaware of what their government is doing in East Timor. We try to see these people not as 'the enemy' but as potential allies."

But although the Timor activists attended the event in friendship, they were not greeted in that manner by Indonesian consular officials, who hired a squad of security personnel to keep them away.

Activists attempting to distribute leaflets reported receiving angry threats of arrest and other harm from the head of the Indonesian security squad, a burly non-Indonesian who called himself "Captain White" in an apparent attempt to pose as a police officer. At one point, "Captain White" and an assistant surrounded a leafleter and roughly ejected him physically from Union Square.

Eventually, the activists were able to summon a real San Francisco police officer, who reminded "Captain White" that they had a right to express their concern about East Timor without being molested. By the end of the event, over 1,500 leaflets had been distributed to a largely receptive audience.

"I learned a lot about Indonesia today," one participant said. "On the surface, it's a land of beautiful dancers in colorful costumes, haunting music, and exotic foods. But below that surface, there is another, ugly reality, especially for those who even mildly dissent."

"We were lucky," she concluded. "We were quickly 'rescued' by a policeman who understood the concept of 'free speech.' But who will rescue the Timorese?"

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